# Witness (1985)

Directed by Peter Weir. Harrison Ford, Kelly McGillis, Josef Sommer, Lukas Haas, Jan Rubes, Alexander Godunov, Danny Glover. Paramount.

**Decent Films Ratings**

[*Witness*](http://www.amazon.com/gp/redirect.html?ie=UTF8&location=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.amazon.com%2Fs%3Fie%3DUTF8%26x%3D0%26ref_%3Dnb%255Fss%26y%3D0%26field-keywords%3Dwitness%26url%3Dsearch-alias%253Ddvd&tag=decentfilms-20&linkCode=ur2&camp=1789&creative=390957) (DVD)

From a [National Catholic Register](http://ncregister.com) review

#### By Steven D. Greydanus

A compelling thriller, a smoldering love story, a thoughtful study in comparative cultures, and a respectful exploration of religious community and nonviolence, *Witness* is one of the high points of 1980s American cinema, and remains one of Australian director Peter Weir’s best films as well as his first American film.

What makes the film work on its various levels is its juxtaposition of contrasts. As a thriller, *Witness* grabs the audience with a chance involvement of a sheltered Amish boy (Lukas Haas) and his widowed mother Rachel (Kelly McGillis) in a dangerous world of urban violence and police corruption. As a love story, the film powerfully realizes the allure of the unobtainable or forbidden, the attraction between the demure but warm-blooded Amish widow and tough Philadelphia detective John Book (Harrison Ford, in perhaps his best performance) being largely implied and unstated rather than overt.

Finally, as a culture study and exploration of faith and nonviolence, *Witness* alternately examines the “English” world through Amish eyes and the Amish world from the perspective of an outsider. Perhaps its only misstep is its rather monotonously grim depiction of the outside world, but it shines in its richly nuanced portrait of Amish life, which avoids the condescending attitudes of earlier depictions of religious communities, neither sentimentalizing its subjects, nor making their unusual ways seem quaint or humorous (cf. [*Lilies of the Field*](http://www.decentfilms.com/reviews/liliesofthefield.html)), nor undermining their beliefs in the face of practical necessity (cf. [*Friendly Persuasion*](http://www.decentfilms.com/reviews/friendlypersuasion.html)).

This Amish community is not without a dark side, as we gather from the ominous warnings of Rachel’s elderly father Eli (Jan Rubes) and his obvious worries about the elders. Yet on the whole *Witness* is an unabashed tribute to a way of life that emphasizes community and cooperation, hard work, practicality, integrity, and responsibility. The barn-raising scene particularly is both a glowing celebration and an unanswerable challenge: This is no Hollywood fantasy, no idealized fiction, but how the Amish actually live. We can hardly imagine living that way ourselves, having that degree of commitment to our neighbor, to our community — but how reassuring it would be in this lonely world to be able to count on others in this way.

*Witness* is about looking, not talking, and some of its best moments are wordless. A brief exchange of looks between young Samuel and a Hasidic Jewish gentleman in the train station, Samuel smiling up hopefully at this familiar-looking bearded, black-garbed, brim-hatted man, and the Jewish man not quite frowning down at the little Christian boy. The powerful scene in the police station in which Book, on the phone, looks across the room at Samuel’s face and knows that he has somehow found the missing piece of the puzzle. And of course the moment that Book and Rachel will never forget, a moment of standing, motionless and silent, looking at one another through a door that ought to have been shut, neither willing for that moment to walk away or to move toward the other.

Another scene worth noting is an ostensibly crowd-pleasing but subtly subversive sequence in the second half of the film that has more significance than it first seems, and triggers the story’s harrowing final act. This scene depicts a trip into town that goes awry when Book and his Amish hosts run into some bullying tourists. Weir gives the audience just exactly the resolution to this conflict they’re rooting for — then pulls the rug out from under them with the unexpected consequences. It’s an oblique challenge to the demands and expectations of mainstream Hollywood filmmaking, and sets the stage for the juxtaposition of conventional and unconventional elements in the finale.

The final act revisits the contrast between the professional violence of Book’s world and the principled nonviolence of the Amish. To its credit, *Witness* avoids definitively endorsing either over the other. Instead, it allows both sides to remain true to themselves, and, in the end, go their separate ways, as they must.

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I saw *Witness* when I was 25 years old and remember the movie well. Or at least one part of the movie,“…a moment of standing, motionless and silent, looking at one another through a door that ought to have been shut…” You know what? The scene left me angry. Even at twenty-five years of age having grown up with two sisters I knew that there was no way that door was accidently left open. I knew that any woman who looks up and sees a man, any man, while she is “compromised” will react. She will not simply pose. That woman knew what she was doing, that man knew it too and, wisely, walked away.